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A Defense of *Sophie's Choice* and an Assertion of Stingo's Importance in It

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Professor Dorothy Kim

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Context

When one thinks of *Sophie's Choice*,¹ more often than not the character of Sophie and her singularly horrific experience during the holocaust comes to mind. This is understandable. Sophie is the titular character. Meryl Streep is nothing if not memorable in her portrayal of Sophie in the movie. The holocaust, an event of such atrocity, often dominates whatever work of which it is part. Sophie's "choice," the emblem and deepest root of her suffering, has become a culturally embedded phrase as the choice between two unbearable options. To think that these two elements of the novel are solely responsible for our understanding of it, however, would be a mistake. A discussion of the less obviously gripping narrator, Stingo, is also vital. In one respect, then, what I urge is a subtle shift in emphasis: from Sophie and the holocaust, to Stingo, the vehicle for seeing and understanding them; the impact of our doing so is critical. Not only do we see how he molds Sophie and the holocaust to his perspective, his perspective itself proves life-giving in its application to our own lives.

The self-effacing footnote that began my essay was not just for cheap laughs, though, and I found while researching that there really is not much written on my favorite book, including analyses of Sophie and the book's

¹ if one thinks of *Sophie's Choice*,

treatment of the holocaust. I had some sense of its esotericism – a book reputed to deal heavily with the holocaust (and over 500 pages) is not the idea of a good time for most people. But once people got over this surface-level inaccessibility, I felt confident that the novel would sweep people away in its narrative as it did me.

I knew this phenomenon was not explainable solely by the subject, either: the holocaust is a daunting subject, and one that affords a great deal of respect and knowledge beforehand. There has not been an indecent amount written about it for this reason, but it has not been ignored, as evident by the handful of works of literature and film that have become well-known. *Number the Stars*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Maus*, and *Night* are commonly read in grade school and *The Sound of Music*, *The Pianist*, *Life is Beautiful*, *Inglourious Basterds*, *Schindler's List*, and, of course, *Sophie's Choice* were highly acclaimed and popular movies.²

It soon became clear to me that perspective is what compels people to write. I read *Sophie's Choice* for the first time when I was a senior in high school, five years younger than Stingo, but very much aligned in interests and crises. Now I am even closer to Stingo's age. It is no surprise I understood him as key to our grasp of the novel as a whole – his opinions and actions had great bearing on me personally.

What made this lightbulb go off for me was Jerzy Krzyzanowski's article, "What's Wrong with Sophie's Choice?" largely because his argument

² "Aftermath: Response and Reflection." *A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust* (2005).

was so seething. His opinions opposed mine, but it was clear that the novel affected him personally. He is a Polish man, and a nationalistic one at that. Accordingly, he came in with previously held sensitivities to all things incongruous with his ideal Poland, and those include the Polish titular character, Sophie, and Styron's depiction of his homeland during the holocaust. What was most important for me to note about his perspective, though, was what compelled him to write: Sophie and the holocaust. Even if many people who read the book may not agree with Krzyzanowski's positions, they are more likely to be inspired to write about the holocaust and the beautiful, complex, and tragic Sophie than they are the foppish and wholly unimposing Stingo. In this way, Krzyzanowski is representative of the handful that were compelled to write about *Sophie's Choice*.

I accept the esotericism of choosing *Sophie's Choice* as the subject of my thesis, but I will not waver in my belief that Stingo is the one who gives us, the novel's readers – even those not aligned with him in age and experience - the most personally applicable takeaways from the book. His openness with expressing his bumbling and insecure fixation on sex not only reveals how he shapes the narrative, but can make anyone who has been insecure (which is to say, most of us) feel more, well, secure.

But Krzyzanowski's arguments are fighting words. *Sophie's Choice* is my favorite novel, and I will not sit by idly while he asserts the ineffectiveness of Styron's depiction of the holocaust and our lack of sympathy for Sophie. He claims the representation of the holocaust in the novel is distorted and

sometimes altogether inaccurate – and it is³ - and accuses Styron of projecting the southern American racist environment he experienced during his upbringing onto Poland, and though accusations of projection may be a bit extreme, Styron may be guilty of forcing a cultural connection where the similarities are rather thin. But to conclude as he does from these errors that Styron's depiction of the holocaust, and its effectiveness in communicating its tragedy, is compromised severely is to allow his national pride to distort his judgment. Primarily, Styron's vision of the devastation in the holocaust is lived out through Sophie, and because her story is tragic, he does justice to the holocaust.

So the heart of the matter is that Krzyzanowski deems Sophie un-tragic by the lewdness he sees in her. He writes that though her character's story is designed to be sympathetic, her "vulgarity, ugliness, and lowest moral and social standards [exhibited through her introductory and frequent] wild-love making... [makes] the reader... subsequently unable to accept her tragic story as it unfolds in the plot for he has been psychologically conditioned to regard her as a [crude] sex symbol rather than a victim."⁴ I must agree that Sophie is incontrovertibly a sex symbol, but this does not mean, as Krzyzanowski writes, that she is one who "inspires revulsion rather than sympathy."⁵ This image is not a product of her, but of her society, and more specifically, her narrator; she

³ Steven Paulsson. "Polish Complicity in the Shoah is a Myth." *Totally Jewish* (2007). http://www.totallyjewish.com/news/special_reports/?content_id=5962

⁴ William Styron. *Sophie's Choice*. (Vintage International, 1992): 66.

⁵ William Styron. *Sophie's Choice*. (Vintage International, 1992): 66.

is in fact perceptive, generous, and kind. For extreme misfortune to fall upon her, then, must be tragic.

Chapter 2

The Foundation of My Essay: Sophie as a Sexual Being

I will make many arguments over the course of this essay, all of them grounded in the fact that Sophie participates in many sexual situations. I do not need to tell you in any exhaustive way that she did, but it would perhaps be a helpful reminder to know with how many people with whom she participates: eleven; and who they are; Rudolf Hoss (Nazi officer in Auschwitz), Wilhelmine, (the Hoss family housekeeper), Wanda (the anti-nazi firebrand), Dr. Jemand von Niemann (SS Doctor), Jozef (her husband in Poland), her anonymous finger rapist, Nathan, Morris Fink (fellow boarder at Yetta Zimmerman's), Mr. Youngstein (her English Professor at Brooklyn College), and her father's scholar friend. Eleven is a lot. And there are two possible answers to it: Sophie is indeed as vulgar as Krzyzanowski accuses her of being, or there is some other explanation for this mass of sex activity surrounding Sophie's life.

By how I phrased this last sentence, you will have guessed that the latter is correct, and you would be right, but the reason is two-fold: first, in the majority of sexual situations, Sophie is the victim of her sexual partner (if partner is an appropriate term) and this quality does much to assert sex as the novel's medium for communicating tragedy and evil; and second, and more directly, Stingo is responsible. Because the latter reason provides valuable

context for the former, I will explain Stingo's perspective as it influences our reading of Sophie first.

Chapter 3

Stingo as Explanation for Sophie as a Sexual Being

Before Stingo relays to us Sophie's experience during the holocaust, he tells us of her "guarded... approach to sex,"⁶ an insight not only important in its role in establishing the trauma she associates with it, but for what it communicates to us about *his* role in emphasizing this aspect of her character. Stingo is the narrator, so it is intuitive that we would be subject to his interpretation of events and people, but the degree to which our experience as readers is shaped by his choices for what to include in his narrative deserves its own study. It is no coincidence that Sophie, someone described as reserved in discussing sex, is one who is sexualized for the entire novel, and by so many people.

What we need to know is "why." Styron described Stingo as one "imprisoned in the dungeons of masturbation,"⁷ and the description is apt. Stingo is a young male, and a virgin, and so it is no surprise that he would fixate on sex.

Stingo's fixation is extreme, though. This stems partly from his wiring, certainly, but many environmental factors are responsible as well. His immediate and intense attraction to Sophie only exacerbates his fixation, and the denial of his sexual validation three times over the course of the novel is

⁶ William Styron. *Sophie's Choice*. (Vintage International, 1992): 104.

⁷ Valarie Meliotes Arms. "An Interview with William Styron." *Contemporary Literature*, Volume 20, No. 1 (Winter 1979): 1.

made all the more crushing by his believed assurance of sexual success. It is no surprise, then, that the confluence of his deep sexual frustration and “Sophiomania”⁸ would translate to the novel which is, after all, his narrative.

To ascertain fully just how deep Stingo is entrenched in the dungeons of masturbation, though, one must recognize his situation at the beginning of the book. He moves from college, without any personal connections, to New York City, a city entirely unfamiliar to him and one with its fast pace and disaffected citizenry geared to alienation. He dreams of being a successful writer, but is forced to weed through hopeless manuscripts at publishing company McGraw Hill to keep himself afloat, a task made all the worse by his having no one with whom to commiserate. All this is to say that life post-college starts inauspiciously for Stingo: he is desperately lonely.

Many young men in his position would seek companionship in his situation, and so it is perhaps not so surprising that he fantasizes about a woman across the street. He imagines himself as her lover,

priapic, ravenous, yet under hair-trigger control. Gently [his] arms surrounded Mavis, and [he] cupped [his] hands under her full, free-floating, honeydew breasts. ‘Is that you, Winston?’ she whispered... “No, it’s I,” said [he], her lover, “let me take you doggie fashion.”⁹

But Stingo does not fantasize that he is only her lover: he is a sort of idealized version of strong, confident, sexual man. The jarring opposition of his actual position to the one he fantasizes, however, indicates that this scene may be as much about him as it is about sex, or, actually, that sex is as much about him

⁸ William Styron. *Sophie’s Choice*. (Vintage International, 1992): 333.

⁹ William Styron. *Sophie’s Choice*. (Vintage International, 1992): 15.

as it is about pleasure. Back in his job at McGraw Hill, he writes caustic reviews of manuscripts, and though they are bad, and his frustration may be in part derived from the waste of his time, the degree of his brutality in those reviews bespeaks an issue deeper than the drivel he reads or even mere intellectual elitism. They displace his frustration with himself, borne out not only in the disparity between his position in work and his desire for a higher kind of art in his own writing, and paralleled by the disparity between his reality and sexual fantasy, but the insecurity that can only come about from not having really achieved anything himself. He has not published yet, and so he takes out his frustration on others because he does not know if he will get, or even deserve, the chance. Similarly, he does not know if his own raw male magnetism (or lack thereof) deserves sex, the affirmation of manhood in many ways. Sex, then, for Stingo, is more than just sex: it is an affirmation of not only his manhood but who he is and what he wants to be.

Whether it is what sex represents to him, or biology, or both, Stingo has an unusually large sexual appetite. When he learns of the death of his old crush Maria Hunt before he meets Sophie, he writes:

Her name was Maria... Hunt, and at fifteen I had been so feverish in my infatuation for her that it seems in retrospect a small-scale madness... This is not on the other hand to define our relationship as Platonic, for in my understanding of that word there is an element of the cerebral, and Maria was not at all bright... I brooded over Maria all afternoon, [and] was overtaken by the most ferociously erotic hallucination I had ever experienced... [When] I woke up, I let out a primeval groan... wrenched from the nethermost dungeons of my soul.¹⁰

¹⁰ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 48.

Many adolescent young men have these fantasies about their high school peers, be they vapid or not, but they remain fantasies of the past, much less “ferociously erotic.” The depth of Stingo’s groan reveals the depth of his sexual longing.

It is not surprising then, that when Stingo encounters the beautiful Sophie for the first time, his impression has a profound effect on him. He writes,

Her nose was swollen with grief and the pink tear stains marred her extraordinary beauty, but not so much so that the beauty itself (including the mole, felicitously placed near the left eye, like a tiny satellite) failed to melt me on the spot – a distinct feeling of liquefaction emanating not from the heart’s region but, amazingly, from that of the stomach, which began to churn as if in revolt from a prolonged fast. I hungered so deeply to put my arms around her, to soothe her, that it became pure discomfort, but a cluster of oddly assorted inhibitions caused me to hold back.¹¹

Two things are important to note: first, Stingo describes these feelings soon after as “love,” a concept Stingo sustains throughout the novel, even though, as Krzyzanowski pointed out in his article, it is rooted in (and remains) physical attraction, giving way to a sort of lust-cum-infatuation; and second, that it affirms his insecurity. Despite his deep attraction, he “hold[s himself] back” from what he wants. The former explains the intense physicality in his narration of Sophie, and the second is further explanation for his fixation.

What continues this sexual bent to all things in the novel, including Sophie, however, is not only that Stingo is given no relief from the torment that is his virginity, or lack of affirmation of his manhood (until the end of the book),

¹¹ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 53.

but that he is given the full expectation of this affirmation only to be denied on three separate occasions: once with Sophie, and two more with Leslie Lapidus and Mary Alice. All three of these denials will be expanded on briefly to show the full extent of their devastation for Stingo, and no doubt makes him fixate on sex further throughout the book.

The degree of his assurance is made most clear through his palpable excitement prior to his experiences with Leslie and Sophie. Of Leslie, he writes:

One may speak of flirtation, the thrill of the chase, the delights of hard-won seduction; each has its peculiar rewards. There is much to be said, however, for the delectable and leisurely anticipation which accompanies the knowledge that it is all ready and waiting and, so to speak, in the bag;¹²

and of Sophie,

Reader, imagine something for a moment. Imagine that you have lived for an indeterminate but longish time with the well founded suspicion that you are suffering from some fatal disease. One morning the telephone rings and it is the doctor saying this: 'You have nothing to worry about, it was all a false alarm.' ... I am not exaggerating... (it may be recalled that I mentioned once that I had never yet really witnessed a female in the nude) when I say that these tidings could not have created the mingled astonishment and sheer brute happiness of Sophie's gentle suggestion... I think I went into that state known medically as hyperventilation and I thought for a moment I might black out completely.¹³

His palpable excitement is not without reason: Leslie concludes their first date by saying "I'll bet you could give a girl a fantastic fucking,"¹⁴ and Sophie suggests "Let's take our clothes off. Let's be naked"¹⁵ (389). As for

¹² William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 130.

¹³ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 389.

¹⁴ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 140.

¹⁵ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 389.

Leslie, her actions betray her words, and it is no surprise that “her unassailable virginity... so wound[ed Stingo’s] spirit that [he] became physically ill,”¹⁶ while Stingo simply betrayed himself with Sophie in ejaculating prematurely, “quite unable to contemplate the depths of [his] failure.”¹⁷ In both cases, his despondency wrecks him, physically in the first, and renders him mentally nonfunctioning in the second. It was not before long that this self-torment gave way to outburst as it did with Mary Alice, but it is useful to note how extreme his conclusion was. After she shares a bed with Stingo, is naked with him, and still denies herself to him, he exclaims,

‘You cock teasers have turned millions of brave young men, many of whom died for your precious asses on the battlefields of the world, into a generation of sexual basket cases!’¹⁸

Whether he believes this is not as important as to acknowledge that only a situation so devastating could make the usually mild-mannered and intelligent Stingo form an outburst of such crude generalization.

And so for all these reasons, it would not be, and is not, a surprise that the text and descriptions of Sophie are so sexualized. Stingo’s virginity is the tangible manifestation of his dissatisfaction with himself, and is exacerbated by the succession of unexpected denials. Because of his introduction to Sophie as a sexual being, and especially because of his subsequent worship of her, Stingo could not but fixate on Sophie’s sexuality during the narrative of her

¹⁶ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 194.

¹⁷ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 391.

¹⁸ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 476.

experience. Sex with Sophie would fulfill his aspirations and relieve him of insecurity.

But perhaps the most revealing excerpt of his fixation on sex takes place in the most unlikely of circumstances: when he recalls the devastating episode of his life when his mother dies of cancer. In the final throes of her illness, Stingo neglects to come home and light the fire for her, instead opting to hang out with his friends. When he finally did come home, he found her shivering. He recollects,

Even as I writhed on the McAlpin's damp and lumpy mattress, grief drove like a spear of ice through my chest when I recaptured the fright in my mother's eyes, wondered once again if that ordeal had not somehow hastened her dying, wondered if she ever forgave me. Fuck it, I thought. Prompted by a commotion next door, I began to think of sex.¹⁹

What is important to note is that sex is the topic that he chooses to relieve himself from his intense guilt and grief. It may cause its own trauma, but here we are wholly affirmed that it is his primary interest, and the means he thinks will lead him to happiness.

So it is not too coarse an oversimplification to claim that sex itself, or what Stingo imagines sex will do for him, defines Stingo and dictates what he does and writes about. It is his means of finding his security and happiness, and its elusiveness only makes his fixation stronger.

¹⁹ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 323.

Chapter 4

The Importance of Stingo's Fixation on Sexuality

Thus far, I have shown that the basis for the prevalence of sex in the novel is due to Stingo, but now I will show his fixation on it and Sophie is in fact fortuitous. Sex is the medium that communicates Sophie's tragedy, and forms the answer to his quest at the beginning of the book, to find "the essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood."²⁰

Sophie's most devastating moments were inflected by sex, or totally immersed in it. We can see this from the beginning, from the same scene Krzyzanowski referenced to begin his essay, our introduction to Sophie through her "wild love-making" with Nathan. It is not irrelevant that the scene ends with Sophie crying, a product of Nathan's rage; sex, sadness are linked inextricably in Sophie's life.

What we may not surmise from the scene is that tragedy and evil are caught up in the act of sex itself, a theme that extends beyond Sophie's experience in the holocaust to her time in New York. Stingo describes that

one late afternoon in June nearly brought a disastrous ending to the precarious equilibrium she had devised for herself... firmly sandwiched between two human shapes [in the subway car]... Sophie, rigidly immobilized in the blackest dark, knew in a flash that no cry or protest would avail her when she felt, now, from behind her the hand slither up between her thighs and underneath her skirt.²¹

²⁰ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): last pre-numbered page.

²¹ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 98-99.

“Precarious” is an appropriate word for her fragile “equilibrium:” after her rape, the security she felt in having been removed physically from Auschwitz is obliterated.

This fraught relationship with sex persists, too. Adding insult to injury, the relationship she started with Nathan as a result of his admittedly magnanimous care for her after this incident, another attempt at stability on her part, gives way to more instability. His general cruelty, administered most devastatingly during sex, becomes a reflection of the trauma Sophie hoped to avoid after the holocaust. “Suck me,” [he tells her during sex] “you Fascist pig, Irma Griese²² Jew-burning cunt!”²³ This level of cruelty extends beyond even the most extreme sado-masochism, and Sophie “feels her eyes brim over with stinging... tears.”²⁴

But maybe I have gotten ahead of myself in describing the failed attempt at getting away from the sexual trauma Sophie experiences during the holocaust that inspired these restorative attempts. In context of her time therein, the failures of her newer sexual relationships are rendered especially heartbreaking.

The first instance we see of this is when Wilhelmine, the Hoss family housekeeper, takes advantage of her:

I’ve been so interested in you... Here we are now, where no one can see us and we can try on a pair of these undies. So your nice bottom will stay all white and soft.” ... The ogress lunged forward then... [and] worked with the frenzy of a madwoman. She was busy with her hard sticky lupine

²² The infamous SS Jew-torturer in concentration camps.

²³ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 369.

²⁴ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 369.

tongue only for a second or two around Sophie's ear, fondled her breasts urgently, manhandled her buttocks, drew back with an expression of lust so intense that it was like some terminal anguish, then set about her serious labors... and squeeze[d] Sophie's hips roundabout with her arms... Sophie was not about to resist or protest... realizing in any case that she was as helpless as a crippled moth... with some dull distant satisfaction... her obdurate dryness, as parched and without juice as the desert sand.²⁵

This event was traumatizing in itself, but Sophie's involuntary involvement in sexual situations during her time in Auschwitz took on far more serious direct implications. Sophie's seemingly successful attempt in seducing Hoss to gain leverage to see her son gives way to tragedy. Hoss breaks his promise to let her see him, and Sophie breaks down, her final hope in life denied to her.

Most tragic of all of course though is the scene in which the SS Doctor, Jemand von Niemand, imposes the "choice" onto her, what child she may keep. While this imposition does not seem to have any sexual overtones, it is often overlooked that he tells her just before, "I'd like to get you in bed with me."²⁶

Sexuality and cruelty are inextricably linked in this book, and it is perhaps no better evidenced by this climax; Stingo did not need to include the potentially gratuitous come on from the SS, or, for that matter, the sordid physicality of the finger rape or of Wilhelmine's groping and Sophie's parched clitoris. But he did, and besides vicarious desires on Stingo's part, its

²⁵ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 286.

²⁶ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 526.

unflinching descriptions give graphic testimony to the internal tragedy Sophie experiences.

This final scene does more, however, than affirm a thematic parallel between emotional and physical tragedy, facilitated by sex: it grounds what Stingo seeks to find at the start of the novel: “the essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood.” Stingo hypothesizes that Dr. von Niemand, a religious man, as evidenced by his quote “Did He not say, ‘Suffer the little children to come unto Me’” before he consigns Sophie to her choice, was having an existential crisis given his brutal job. He needed to reaffirm God’s existence, and in the hellish circumstance that was Auschwitz, perhaps the only way to do that was to inflict on someone (and perhaps on himself too) the most unthinkable evil deed, the choice he gave Sophie, for if one could still be shocked by its awfulness, by indirect proof, God must exist.

To my mind, Stingo may take too many things for granted, most importantly that Dr. von Niemand still had a sort of perverse morality in him. His act strikes me as a sort of jealous and perverse retribution on someone he found beautiful, could not “possess,” and did not want to be happy, without any grander moral calculations. Though the “brotherhood” for which he sees von Niemand yearn in his “absolute evil” may be questionable, Stingo hits on an important truth: absolute evil and the most general brotherhood, “good,” are intertwined because one would not exist without the other. The holocaust, witness to some of the most horrifying evil this world has known, makes this known as clearly as any could.

Chapter 5

A Defense of Sophie

Stingo is largely responsible for the pervasive sexuality in the novel, and sexuality serves as the medium for the communication of evil in the novel. Together they temper our perspective on Sophie's character, and can even engender some sympathy for her. But Krzyzanowski's assertions that the vulgarity he sees in Sophie's character is "structurally built into the plot rather than merely reported in her own words, as the Auschwitz scenes are"²⁷ and reference to the quote from the novel that Sophie is "both victim and accomplice to the mass slaughter"²⁸ requires a more extensive explanation of why Sophie deserves our sympathy, and may be thought of as "good."

First things first: Krzyzanowski reads with an almost Puritanical moral sensibility. Cursing on occasion, drinking alcohol, and engaging in sex do not make someone "bad," as he seems to think it does, but his accusations should be met systematically anyway. Sophie is not "an accomplice to the mass slaughter" during the holocaust, but merely thinks she is, something put upon her by her society and not existing in herself. Second, and related to the reason for this first belief, the emphasis on Sophie's sexuality is not only a product of Stingo's fixation on sex and on her, but is reflective of a greater societal fixation on female beauty. And third, Sophie is perceptive, sensitive,

²⁷ Jerzy Krzyzanowski. "What's Wrong with Sophie's Choice." *Polish American Studies, Volume 40, No. 1* (1983): 70.

²⁸ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 246.

generous, and kind, qualities made most clear by her interactions with Stingo, and cement her “goodness.”

In response to Sophie being “accomplice to the mass slaughter,” it is necessary to analyze how exactly she was accomplice. Krzyzanowski distorts for both himself and his readers the extent of Sophie’s cruelty for merely being involved in the Hoss’ household affairs. It may have been objectionable that she scribed Hoss’ anti-semitic messages, but it is hardly one that should be used to make any general claims about the “revolting” nature of her character. Sophie provides her own defense in relaying to Stingo how people acted during the holocaust:

But such a terrible place was the Auschwitz... that you really could not say that this person *should* have done a certain thing in a fine or noble fashion, as in the other world... the Nazis were murderers and when they were not murdering they turned people into sick animals, so if what the people done was not so noble, or even was like animals, then you have to understand it, hating it maybe but pitying it at the same time, because you knew how easy it was for you to act like an animal too.²⁹

I for one am satisfied to accept it. People in situations with much lower stakes compromise their values regularly through their complicity in causes they may not believe in as Sophie did, but I would not term them “bad.” Sophie’s action may not have been morally impeccable, but I will not hold her to any higher standard than I do others. Moreover, it is important to recognize the context in which she acted. I alluded to “stakes” earlier, and very few are capable of even understanding the kind of pressure people underwent in making every

²⁹ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 311.

action they did to increase their chance of survival. Couple that with an equally unimaginable introduction to the possibility of human evil through what the Nazis did, people's entire range of morality would have been reorganized, bounded by extremes that would have never occurred to them in their daily lives. It would have been understandable that someone would adjust their actions accordingly. Stealing a piece of bread from your neighbor who is just days from death seems a meaningless or even nonexistent fault in light of the infamous gas chambers, and it seems reasonable to me to judge Sophie's actions in this range as well. I will not term what she did in scribing for Hoss, or even in trying to seduce him, then, as objectionable. What is more, Sophie has a more direct motivation in all of this. She does not act the way she does just for herself: she does what she does just to see her son, Jan. It was the one hope keeping her alive, and that she could attempt to do that, inflicting no direct harm on any other, should be judged appropriately.

A societal force greater than the holocaust dictates Sophie's perceived lewdness, though: a general focus on woman's exterior beauty. Sophie was born beautiful, and had to deal with its inherent implications for the rest of her life. Sophie "steals a narcissistic glance"³⁰ in the mirror before she leaves for the beach one day with Nathan and Stingo, but should not be judged harshly. Sophie's sense of her beauty does not exist without others' adulation. It is not pure vanity that inspires this glance when almost everyone with whom we see her develop a relationship in the book is attracted to her. And this is not just

³⁰ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 156.

the case with Wilhelmine, Hoss, the SS Doctor, Nathan or Stingo. Her Brooklyn College English professor, Mr. Youngstein,

clumsy and groping passion for her, expressed in faun-gazes of yearning... was obviously smitten by her, but had made no advances other than to suggest awkwardly each day that she remain for a few moments after class so that he might read her what he called some 'representative American verse.'³¹

Her friend Wanda from the holocaust sleeps with her despite their philosophical differences. Morris Fink calls her "some dish"³² in introducing her to Stingo, and her own father even uses it to his advantage in making political deals.

Sophie makes her awareness of her effect on others known too when, after a fight with Nathan, she exclaims to Stingo, "Do you think he done that out of love, out of kindness? No, Stingo, he done such a thing only so he could use me, have me, fuck me, beat me, have some object to possess! That's all, some *object*."³³ She later believes she overreacted, but as in many angry declarations, there is some truth. While I believe Nathan does care for Sophie as a person, and admires her for more than her beauty - and Sophie recognizes this - she also identifies a truth about those who interact with her, and it is no surprise that this would give her deep anguish.

But this anguish is not only reserved for others: her anger with Nathan in this case, but indeed many of her male partners, transfers itself to self-loathing. Even as she explains to Stingo, as included earlier in this section,

³¹ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 109.

³² William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 44.

³³ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 383.

“such a terrible place was the Auschwitz... that you really could not say that this person *should* have done a certain thing in a fine or noble fashion, as in the other world,” she cannot give herself this break, and this self-loathing and conviction of her inadequacy is her central tragedy. Soon after she rants to Stingo about the dehumanization of being objectified by men, she tells him, “Oh, I have such badness,”³⁴ or she believes she deserves the evil put upon her, and asserts earlier that “I have no talents.”³⁵ This seems irrational, and it is, but it is a result of her experience in the holocaust. Stingo mentions that Sophie experiences survivor guilt, and this can be seen acted out most powerfully in her submission to Nathan during their only fully described sex scene in which Nathan calls her “Irma Giese, Jew-burning cunt” and she cries.

Stingo may claim she does not know why she cries, but it is clear to the reader that the decisive factor is her grim acceptance of Nathan’s accusations. Of course, Nathan is cruel, and to have one’s lover liken one to the infamous Nazi Jew torturer steps over any bounds of sado-masochism, but what destroys her is what Nathan did not and could not know. Sophie is brought back to her collaboration with Hoss and especially to her involuntary, but nonetheless complicit choice in killing her son Eva, and every day she lives she must ask herself why this privilege³⁶ was bestowed on her. She agrees

³⁴ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 391.

³⁵ William Styron. Sophie’s Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 124.

³⁶ Or, really, burden

with him, and, is reinforced in her belief in her absolute baseness in a setting with the opposite end in mind. It could not but bring tears.

The scene is more complex, though, and anyone who has read the book would take issue with my not including Sophie's seemingly incongruous enjoyment during the scene:

[even] while he taunts her and abuses her... her pleasure is not mere mild enjoyment but the perennially re-created bliss, and chill waves shiver down her back as she sucks and sucks and sucks. She is not even surprised that the more he torments her scalp, the more he goads her with that detested "Irma" the more gluttonous becomes her lust.³⁷

Nathan's sado-masochism crossed a line, but it did not exist in a vacuum.

Sophie does not enjoy sex with him just because he provides her with a penis.

Her private act with Nathan is the means through which she can affirm her sense of badness, her punishment, which itself is a kind of purging. It is okay for her to be "bad" with someone she trusts, someone who knows this "badness" and likes her anyway. It would of course be better if he did not judge her for it either, but this is just one more reason for her tragedy. She is in a catch-22: healthy, supportive sex would be the direct means to set right all the sex previously in her life caught up in tragedy and evil. Sex is thought of as a pleasurable act, and it should be one, and so this continual attempt on her part to make it something pleasurable is at once normal and admirable. She looks to it to set her past right, but she only is confirmed of its – and, more importantly, *her* – evil.

³⁷ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 369.

Sophie must live with the belief of her evil. What is worse is that in searching for a reason why she was permitted to live anyway, perhaps the only causal conclusion she could draw was that her beauty saved her. What is worst is that the narration only affirms that this is true. It is founded on something she was born into, rather than something she deserves, and that can only lead to a very low self-opinion.

This does not mean we need to have a low opinion of her. Though her own opinion of herself and what her use is leads to the scene with which Krzyzanowski may have taken greatest issue, even if he did not mention it explicitly – the one wherein Sophie takes Stingo's virginity despite not loving him – I believe this scene, and its surrounding context, is the one through which we can see Sophie is most "good."

Consider Sophie's situation. She travels somewhat apprehensively with Stingo to Virginia. She understands Nathan is dangerous, but she loves him, and up until he threatens both her and Stingo with death, she believes she will marry him that day. Stingo, meanwhile, too infatuated with her to notice, tries to persuade her of the necessity of her marriage to him under the thin guise of "Southern social custom." Her wedding dress to Nathan, though, serves as a constant reminder of the sharp juxtaposition between her unpromising future with Stingo – for which she was prepared no less – and her previous, one which, if severely flawed, was at least wonderful by turns, and on her terms.

And now consider Sophie. She cries, of course, but manages to understand the situation from Stingo's perspective. She knows that he is deeply attracted to her, and may confuse it with love. Despite Stingo's conviction that Sophie is "plainly oblivious of my undisguised Sophiemania,"³⁸ based on her "impish"³⁹ expression as she "cocked her eye"⁴⁰ knowingly at him, and especially what she says:

You'll find some beautiful girl, Stingo, very soon – I'm sure of that. Someone very sexy. Someone like that good-looking Leslie Lapidus, only less of the coquette, more complaisante,⁴¹

It is quite clear to the reader that Stingo, not Sophie, is the one plainly oblivious. She knows what Stingo needs is someone who is good-looking, and who will accommodate his needs. She understood, to Stingo's surprise, that Leslie did not end up satisfying him, and understands that she could fill this role for him. Having nothing more to live for, assured of the knowledge that she will never reunite with Jan, and of the terminus of her relationship with Nathan, and the conviction that her only use is her body, one must consider her final gesture before her suicide, her offering of it to Stingo, as the kindest and most generous thing she could have done.

Of course, this offering is fraught. We do not want her to feel that her only use is her body. We do not want her to feel she has nothing to sustain her. But we must blame the holocaust and our society for her feelings. And

³⁸ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 333.

³⁹ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 333.

⁴⁰ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 333.

⁴¹ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 333.

we must recognize the sympathy for her that grounds our own wants and her kindness for her decisions given her situation and beliefs.

Chapter 6

Clarifying Styron's Presence in the Novel

The only way for Sophie's sexual act with Stingo to be as magnanimous as it was, however, was for Stingo not to know that it was an act of generosity. Otherwise, the sexual validation he got would have been a sort of hoax. If he could not still look back on it fondly, it would not have endowed him with the same confidence. As I have argued, his individual story in the book can be seen as a quest for sexual fulfillment, for the validation it would give to him as a man, but if he did not earn his fulfillment by virtue of his merits, it would raise doubts about the larger issue of his manhood.

Fortunately for him, he misperceives Sophie's reasons for their sexual act:

Sophie's lust was as boundless as my own, I'm sure, but for more complex reasons; it had to do, of course, with her good raw natural animal passion, but it was also both a plunge into carnal oblivion and a flight from memory and grief. More than that, I now see, it was a frantic and orgiastic attempt to beat back death.⁴²

This hypothesis is wrong for a couple of reasons. Given her speedy return to Flatbush and her suicide pact with Nathan, it is unlikely that this act was any attempt to beat back death – she wanted it. What is more, though her relationship with sex is admittedly fraught, and perhaps any experience with it after the holocaust is an attempt to restore its goodness, or sanctity, or both, and thus is a way of battling her memory and grief, to say that it is a “*flight*

⁴² William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 541.

from memory and grief” is the opposite of her active war against what troubles her.

All this is to say, Stingo is far too self-congratulatory. He imagines himself as one who can supply “carnal oblivion” and something “orgiastic,” even though he admits that Sophie coached him through the whole experience. It is gratifying that Stingo’s quest for sexual (and self-) fulfillment comes full circle, that he becomes a version of the “ravenous, priapic lover” of his fantasy, but whether it be bliss, or naivety, or both, he misses what really went on in his climactic scene.

So what does this show? Merely that Stingo is naïve? Well, yes, but this is important enough a point to warrant its own study. It is a common belief on the part of critics to say that the author, William Styron and the narrator, Stingo are one in the same. Krzyzanowski explains why this author-narrator relation is so intertwined:

But one can also stop playing academic games and stop pretending it is the fictional narrator who expresses all those attitudes and feelings. Autobiographical references alone would suffice to identify the narrator as the author himself, and if these could be challenged as “unscientific” we may simply say that the novel was conceived, composed and written not by a fictitious Stingo but by William Styron himself who, as a responsible author, should be held accountable for writing it as he has... It is William Styron, then, who is responsible for projecting his own complexes onto his characters.⁴³

And he is right about a few things: autobiographical references abound in the novel. Styron and Stingo went to Duke, they both moved to the city to begin

⁴³ Jerzy Krzyzanowski. “What’s Wrong with Sophie’s Choice.” *Polish American Studies*, Volume 40, No. 1 (1983): 71.

their career, and they both worked for McGraw Hill. Unsurprisingly, it often does seem that Stingo merely acts as the vehicle to express things that Styron himself wants to communicate. Styron writes that,

Not only does [autobiographical intent] not disturb me, I wouldn't feel happy unless the [readers] immediately identified Stingo as a man masquerading as Bill Styron.⁴⁴

Nowhere, however, do I think this compromises the integrity of characters as individuals, and nowhere is this more evident in the scene in which Stingo loses his virginity to Sophie, and its surrounding context. The novel is written in retrospect by an older Stingo recounting his experience as a younger Stingo. Styron is often mistaken for this "older, wiser Stingo," but this climax is the best evidence for an even more removed narrator, as even the older Stingo does not recognize the cues Sophie gives. To understand that Styron is an even more removed participant in the novel is to give the novel more credit. It is not just that we can see Stingo's shortcomings; it is that Styron *wants* us to see his shortcomings, and so we judge on his terms. The final question then is, if the novel tackles such weighty issues as death, evil and sex, all in the shadow of the holocaust, why have a narrator with shortcomings be the one delivering them? The answer to this question will comprise my next chapter.

⁴⁴ Valarie Meliotes Arms. "An Interview with William Styron." *Contemporary Literature*, Volume 20, No. 1 (Winter 1979): 1.

Chapter 7

A Defense of Stingo

There are a few reasons Styron chose Stingo, narrator with identified character flaws, to deliver the complex messages in the novel. First, as I have discussed already but bears repeating: it is his fixation on sex and Sophie, the hallmarks of his character, that shape the direction of the novel, and without him and his perspective, we would not have the messages he communicates through Sophie and her experience in the holocaust. Second, he is intelligent enough to deliver reliable messages despite reservations we may have with his character. And third, it is not only that his shortcomings define him; they are also, perhaps unexpectedly, the vehicle for our liking him.

Up to this point in my thesis, it would be easy to conclude that Stingo is nothing more than a young, shallow horn-ball. Though it may not be absolutely necessary for readers to like the message-bearer of the novel, only that he is reliable and trustworthy enough to do so, to have a narrator that we actually support gives us greater incentive, and makes us more likely, to absorb the messages he puts forth. It is critical, then, for me to show that Stingo is likable. In turn, this will be the most important argument in my essay for a more fundamental reason: insofar as Krzyzanowski argues his case for what is wrong with Sophie's Choice, I am here to argue the case for what is right about it. And what I feel most strongly is that Stingo is not a narrator for whom to apologize, or is a qualification for the novel's success - he is the

reason for it, and not just because he is an effective narrator. He is someone to whom someone can relate who was ever insecure, and /or dealing with some of life's most probing questions. His openness in sharing his own issues and concerns is perhaps the novel's greatest gift in that it puts readers at ease with their own insecurities.

The best way to show both his intelligence and likableness is through portions of the novel where he is most liable to come across as unpleasant. It is a resounding confirmation that if he is both intelligent and likable in these situations, he will only be more so in all others. To my mind, these are the scenes in which his sexualized view of the world is most apparent, and runs the greatest risk of being thought "crude," the scenes wherein he misperceives Sophie's intentions when she takes his virginity, in his cruelty to Mary Alice, and in his sudden turn from thinking about his mother's cancer to sex.

Regarding his intelligence, especially considering he is a writer, it is not best communicated through his citations of holocaust thought or literary references (though it does help), but rather through his ability to articulate what he thinks and feels. Unfortunately for Stingo, this ability may be the thing most taken for granted, because it is the quality which makes his narrative most unnoticed in its easy readability.

Take his detailed and profoundly physical sexual descriptions. Nathan's pulsating penis imagined as a "palm tree,"⁴⁵ Wilhelmine's groping of Sophie's "parched" clitoris, and the woman across the street's "honeydew breasts"

⁴⁵ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992), 369.

reveal much about the narrator's interest in the subjects, but they also transport us to the scene: to the juxtaposition between the peace the palm tree represents and the dark, cathartic sex Sophie and Nathan have, to the griminess of Wilhelmine, to Stingo's conviction of the possibility for a kind of sweet purity in his own sexuality.

But we must note his restraint in some sexual situations as well. Stingo is often faulted for his pedantry and ramblings, but in his initial physical description of Sophie, cursing of Mary Alice and crude change of subjects from thoughts of his mother's cancer to sex without apology, he exhibits neither. Though they are not entirely defensible, he is smart enough to trust that we understand the naturalness and/or reasonableness of such thoughts. Morris Fink, just some guy, really, and, thus representative of his gender, describes Sophie as "some dish" just before Stingo sees her, and so his physical description of her should not be thought of as uniquely shallow: shallow, yes, but not uniquely so. And this is important; as soon as we recognize that more people, and perhaps males in particular, are culpable of the same emphasis placed on exteriors and sex, not only will we not hold Stingo to an unreasonably high standard, we will find he is someone with whom to identify.

And so we will see that though his cursing of Mary Alice may be a bit lopsided, and generalizing in his accusation – she is, in all likelihood, oblivious to the emotional torture she inflicts upon Stingo – there is an element of truth in his accusation. Women do have the power to tease and withhold, and on many occasions it is used to torture men. Regardless of Mary Alice's intent (or

lack thereof), we cannot cast off Stingo's exclamation as uninformed, and so his plight is made more pitiable.

Finally, the same principle holds regarding his coarse change of subjects from his mother's cancer to sex. I do not deny that it is not ideal, but one must be honest with oneself in reflecting upon this scene: is it not unreasonable that thoughts so harrowing must be relieved by something? Stingo has deep remorse for his treatment of his mother, but one cannot, and should not, dwell excessively on what is gone. It is unhealthy. What is more, it is the message Stingo leaves us: after crying over the suicides of Sophie and Nathan, he awakes to morning, and, as the black woman on the train explains to him as he returns to Flatbush hoping to stop the couples' suicide, "Ev'rything gone' be alright,"⁴⁶ which functions both as a consolation for what is literally gone, and an optimistic look at what the future is "going" to be.

Understanding that Stingo's actions and thoughts are not as bad, or unusual, as they may initially seem through a cursory reflection on human psychology, as well as his wherewithal to trust us to understand it, does much to defend Stingo. It is certainly enough to affirm him as a reasonable narrator of the messages in the book, and even enough to engender some warmth toward him by itself. He wins us, though, by something more fundamental to this identification, and what I have only hinted at thus far: his openness with his less-than-appealing actions and thoughts, and his bumbling, insecure delivery of them. Identification works both ways: what defends Stingo defends

⁴⁶ William Styron. Sophie's Choice. (Vintage International, 1992): 552.

us. Because he is willing to share his dirtier inner secrets, and we are able to like him anyway, we feel secure that when we identify with them as well, we may still be normal and likable.

Reference once more the fantasy Stingo has with the woman across the street in which he imagines himself under “hair-trigger control... cupp[ing his] hands under her full, free-floating, honeydew breasts. ‘Is that you, Winston?’ she whispered... “No, it’s I,” said [he], her lover, “let me take you doggie fashion.” It is a bold introduction to his character, and potentially disconcerting – certainly cringe-worthy. But that is the point: the camp of his writing and delivery assures us, perhaps partially in spite of himself, that he is aware of the limitations his ineptitude places on his ability to solve his sex troubles. We laugh at him, but his willingness to put himself out there, ineptitude and all, indicates that he laughs along side us. And so in this subtle way, we are invited to his side. Once this is done, it is hard not to root for him.

This self-effacement has direct application to us too. We do not just align with Stingo’s actions and thoughts because we can identify with them and commiserate with him. Because we identify with the more painful insecurities he expresses, we ourselves are affirmed in their normalcy. What he experiences may apply most directly to the insecurities of a young man finding his direction in life, but surely a broader range of people have experienced some variation of his missteps. Has not everyone had an unrealistic, or even deranged sexual fantasy? Has not everyone buried a nugget of piercing truth in a lopsided, exaggerated outburst? Has not everyone been delusional in

their idea of “love,” and/or distorted their perception of the “loved” accordingly?

I do not think I risk being wrong too much in saying that everyone has, and because we still perceive Stingo as “good,” the thoughts we keep to ourselves that we think distasteful, and, perhaps worse, unique to us, is made more normal. Stingo endows us with greater security in ourselves, and that is the novel’s greatest gift.

Chapter 8

A Final Consideration

Perhaps I am not the best person to argue in defense of Stingo's identification of a universality in human experience. I mentioned in the introduction the importance of my perspective in my understanding of Stingo as critical to the novel. But of course my perspective does more than that: it predisposed me to identify with Stingo's views and place importance on his chosen subject matter, and as consequence, our closeness in age, background and issues on which we place import, surely has a large deal to do with the security it gave me personally.

If the "best" judge is someone without bias (or less bias, at least), without inherent predisposition to identify with the narrator and, thus, the messages he and his character convey, I am not that. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that some people who read my defense of *Sophie's Choice* will cite this inherent bias as reason for what they perceive as a necessarily skewed reading of the text.

I will not apologize for my reading, however, and for two important reasons. First, I think I am right in the most concrete, factual sense. Besides the arguments I have just written, and I hope were persuasive, this element of perspective in the novel proves to be critical again. I have shown the distance between Styron and Stingo in the novel, and shown Styron's more nuanced view of his subjects, but it is also important to keep in mind the rationale

behind the accusations that they are the same: they are in many ways. As I explained earlier, Styron himself proclaimed that he wrote the novel partially as an autobiography. As such, it is only natural that the autobiographer would place importance on the person through whom he speaks at least some of the time. Stingo's importance is therefore built-in.

The second reason I will not apologize for my reading is more personal. This is my senior thesis. It is the culmination of my time learning and writing in college, however inadequate any "culmination" such as this is bound to be. Without grading pressures provided I just finish this thing, besides personal pride, my own strong feelings on the subject of my choice propelled me to write. So I wanted to write about something that matters to me. *Sophie's Choice* is my favorite book, and Stingo is my favorite character. Insofar as I felt the majority of critics, however small in number they may have been, got the book wrong, my desire became strong to show what makes the book and Stingo "good," in all senses of the word.

To do this, the best way I knew how was to put myself in my essay, to show that this book and this topic actually matter to me. Surely, a writer can convey one's personality while at the same time maintaining a professionalism to their work that I have no doubt compromised somewhat, by both my colloquialism and self-referencing, and so in this sense I am sad that I did not feel I was able to do this. On the other hand, though, I am just a senior in college, still a relative beginner in the lifelong pursuit of personal expression and thoughtful communication. I have much writing left to do, and so this

essay is more a marker of my current positions as an observer, writer and thinker as much as anything else. This essay commemorates where I am in my development, and I cannot apologize for that.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

My last chapter was certainly too self-indulgent, however, to conclude an essay that is, at least ostensibly anyway, about *Sophie's Choice*. Jerzy Krzyanowski framed my defense of the book in his accusations of Sophie's vulgarity, and our consequential inability to feel sympathy for her; of Styron's portrayal of the holocaust as ineffective; and in his general devaluing of Stingo's importance in the novel. Sophie is not vulgar, but simply convinces herself through a confluence of societal forces that she is. These are not the same, and through her actions toward Stingo, we can see she is in fact perceptive, generous, and kind. Her tragedy is a singularly devastating manifestation of the evils of the holocaust. It has not been culturally adopted as an emblem of unspeakable evil for nothing, and so does justice to the event. And last, Stingo is important for two reasons: because he is the means by which everything in the novel is framed and because the honesty with which he expresses his own insecurities makes his readers feel more secure in having theirs.

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